

Mepal Scrapbook 1897 to 1990

Facts, Features and (occasional) Fallacies
reported in Cambridge Newspapers

summarised by

Mike Petty

Many of these stories were featured in my ‘Looking Back’ column in the Cambridge News from 1996-2014. They are supplemented by some selections ‘From our Old Files’ published in the Cambridge Independent Press and other notes.

The complete ‘Cambridgeshire Scrapbook’ of which this is a small section is published online at bit.ly/CambsCollection

I have digital and other copies of most of the stories summarised.
I hope to publish these online one day. If you would like them in the meantime then please get in touch.

The original volumes are housed in the Cambridgeshire Collection at Cambridge Central Library where there are many other indexes dating back to 1770.

They also have detailed newspaper cuttings files on over 750 topics that have been compiled since the 1960s.

Newspapers sometimes get things wrong. I copy things out incorrectly. Do check

There are a multitude of spelling and layout errors. Please forgive or correct them

News never stops but this file was finished on 31 August 2016.

I will maintain supplements and corrections – contact me for anything you need

Please make what use of these notes that you may. Kindly remember where they came from

See my website – www.mikepetty.org.uk for further notes.

Mike Petty, Stretham

2016

1900 02 15

The Isle of Ely highways committee called attention to the dilapidated condition of the private road in the parish of Mepal known as "Ireton's Way". On one occasion their steam roller got stuck in the road and was with difficulty extricated. There was no other way to get to this part of the Isle. A very heavy toll was charged upon it but there would be no complaint if it were properly repaired. They did not know the peculiar circumstances of the owner of the road. The best plan would be to obtain control of it, otherwise it might only be half repaired.

1903 10 14

The Rev Dr. J. Mayo sued the churchwardens of Mepal. He said he had been requested to come from Cambridge on a Sunday to preach in the absence of the vicar; his charge was £2.2.0 with 5s.9d. expenses. The judge said the sum seemed not too much for the services he had rendered and he hoped the money would come immediately the judgement was pronounced. He trusted the churchwardens would pay it, and not the new incumbent.

1908 04 03

A Witcham labourer had been employed to look after the sluice doors of the Mepal catchwater drain. After he was dismissed the gates had frequently been obstructed. He was seen deliberately dropping pieces of brick into the sluice, preventing the doors closing automatically. In the event of a high tide it might have resulted in the flooding of the Fen lands, involving very heavy damage. He was fined the enormous sum of £100 plus costs. 08 04 03a

1910 10 07

An extensive stack fire broke out on the premises of Messrs Pearson Bros, the well-known horse breeders at Mepal. Most of the men were working on the land but the women, greatly to their credit, proved equal to the occasion. Leaving their homes, they hurried to the fire equipped with pails and anything else that might answer the purpose. So hard did the women work that the wells were soon dried up and the river at Mepal Bridge was resorted to, several neighbours lending their water carts to fetch supplies. Stock including three valuable stud horses and 23 calves were rescue from the blazing stables. 10 10 07g

1911 05 26

Isleham woman suicide in river between Mepal and Sutton Gault – 11 05 26f
Mepal inquest on woman drowned in New Bedford river – 11 05 26g

1913 01 03

Mepal parish pump in bad condition

1913 02 14

Mepal Hiam's Farm wanted as small-holdings

1913 10 24

Mepal and Sutton land sale

1913 12 05

Mepal new road

1914 10 23

Mepal – death Albert Rayner, farmer

1914 11 20

Atkins, Mepal, potato case

1922 08 04

The reports of the Isle of Ely Highways and Bridges Committee revealed that as owners of the Mepal Bridge the Ouse Drainage Board had advised that it was not sufficient to bear the modern traffic. The Board were advised that the bridge was originally built for tenants and servants of the Bedford Level Corporation, and that they were under no obligation to build a new bridge suitable for modern traffic. The Board desired to know whether the County Council would be prepared to discuss terms for the erection of a new bridge, and for the future maintenance of such bridge

1922 10 11

By the erection of a handsome stone memorial cross to perpetuate the memory of those belonging to the parish who fell in the Great War, Mepal has paid a worthy tribute. From this small village with a population of less than 100, twelve men gave their lives, and one woman. On no other roll in the Ely district has a woman's name appeared. Miss Nellie Waters was stationed at the army canteen at Thetford, Norfolk, and while there contracted pneumonia from which she died. Her sister served in canteens abroad for some considerable time and was demobilised at the end of the war

1924 06 02

In the list of King's birthday honours Mr Fred Hiam, the well-known agriculturist, receives a knighthood. During the war his expert knowledge made him a fitting person to hold the post of Director of Vegetable Supplies and in 1918 he dealt entirely with the whole of the potato crop of Great Britain. That crop as so plentiful that some could be spared for other countries. Sir Frederick was born at Upwell, and when he was two years of age his father removed to Mepal. He then went to London to sell potatoes there and in a few years grew more than he could sell. He now owns 8,000 acres of land in the Isle of Ely

1924 06 03

A distressing story of a little girl's death in her father's factory at Mepal was told at an inquest. The father was a contractor and farmer. He had a Lister electric engine and plant which was used for cooking meat in bad weather. There was an ice box to it, and they were also able to make electric light for his own purpose and to grind sausage meat. He saw his daughter go across to the shop. A little while afterwards he went into the granary and saw his daughter hanging by her hair.

1924 09 24

Sidney Atkins lost some fowls from a hen house in a grass field on the Witcham Road, Mepal. The door was locked. It appeared to have been lifted off the ground. On the following morning PC Baker was passing the Ship Inn at Sutton, and looking over the wall saw some pullets which corresponded with those missing. Amid much struggling and crackling Atkins swore to each of the birds as he handed them to him out of a hamper.

1927 11 03

A man was charged with stealing a sack containing one pair of men's breeches and a shirt from the taproom of the Three Pickerels public house at Mepal. Henry Thomas Smith told the court he had gone to the pub with his bag, put it under a seat in the taproom and then gone into another room. When he went for his sack it had gone. The accused said: "I thought it was my mate's bag so I picked it up and took it away. When I saw Bill I found he had got his sack. It was a great mistake, and, on my oath I never stole it". He was fined £1.1s.8d

1928 10 23

The Isle of Ely County Council has taken over the road across Mepal Causeway as a main road but have no responsibility for a concrete viaduct. But, recognising the great delay and danger to the public when the road is flooded, they are prepared to find 25% of the cost. During floods last winter traffic

was held up for three weeks; it was impossible to get a boat across and 40 workmen from Mepal had to walk eight miles after a day's work, travelling from Bluntisham to Sutton by rail. If the viaduct was built it would be one of the greatest improvements since the Council had been in existence.

1932 05 10

An inquiry was held at the Three Pickerels Inn, Mepal on a man who'd lived on No.1 Houseboat on the Counter Drain. He'd been playing the accordion, was quite sober and in the best of spirits but was later pulled from the water by his brother on Houseboat no.5. The deck had no protection, there was a strong wind and he might have lost his balance and slipped into the water which was fix feet deep. 32 05 10

1933 03 13

The Cranbrook Drain was in a choked condition. It was not included in the Sutton and Mepal Internal Drainage Board area but higher up, above Somersham, it was shown as a public drain. Riparian owners had cleaned it out in the past but now refused to do anything more. They had paid taxes for 20 years and received no benefit. Now they should ask the Minister who was responsible. 33 03 13b

1935 01 22

Mepal gravel pit tragedy – 35 01 22b & c

1936 09 21

A pair of cottages at Mepal was completely destroyed by fire. Standing on their own close to the main road, on the Ely side of the village, the cottages, which were thatched, had been empty for about two months. The fire was first noticed at midnight and although the Sutton Brigade, under Chief Officer P. Painter, made a prompt turn-out and were in action until 8 a.m., the flames defeated their efforts and destroyed the buildings 36 09 21a

1937 04 30

Mepal seat damaged – 37 04 30a

1937 08 03

Inquests on Mepal man struck by van, Stuntney Hall tree branch & of motor cyclist kicked by horse near Caxton Gibbet 37 08 03b & c

1950 05 05

The Secretary of State for Air has said it has now been decided that Mepal would not be retained for RAF use and the airfield had been allocated for long-term agricultural use. The Ely Rural Council had been requested to take over responsibility for housing the Poles who lived in the hatted camp to the East of the aerodrome.

1950 05 16

A recent weekend exercise of the 250th Field Squadron, Royal Engineers, included the dismantling and returning to store of a Bailey bridge which had been erected across the counter-wash drain near Mepal. The phenomenal speed with which the job was carried out is accounted for by the fact that the squadron has a canteen, that in the canteen there is a television set and that on this particular Saturday a very important event in the sporting calendar was being televised.

1950 05 22

The whirlwind which swept through Cambridgeshire last night caused extensive damage at Sutton. A double-decker Eastern Counties bus was lifted up by the miniature tornado and thrown down onto its side shaking up the passengers and injuring at least two. The bus was just leaving Sutton on its way to March, and was travelling along Ely Road carrying 14 passengers. The driver was uninjured but the conductor was knocked unconscious. Breakdown crews from Cambridge and Peterborough tried to move the bus off the road. Traffic was diverted through Mepal airdrome.

1950 06 23

Traffic using the Chatteris-Mepal road has for sometime past unknowingly had a miraculous escape from being involved in a serious accident on the Chatteris side of the bridge over the Old Bedford River. The subsoil under the metal road had completely subsided leaving only one thickness of road metal to prevent traffic from dropping into a large cavity about eight feet deep, which extends to almost half the width of the road. It might have collapsed at any moment

1950 09 08

A £12,000 scheme for the provision of a new road across the Mepal airfield was approved by the Isle of Ely County Council Highways Committee subject to the approval of the Ministry of Transport.

1952 06 27

A member of the Isle of Ely County Council was accused of corrupt practices. It was alleged he had paid the landlords of the Red Lion, Three Pickerels and Cross Keys public houses at Mepal, for the expense of providing drinks to influence electors to vote at the election. Having been elected to the county council he gave them £1 to celebrate his victory, but it so happened he was also a candidate for the forthcoming Ely Rural Council election. He also gave £1 to Wardy Hill Social Club, £5 to the headmaster of Mepal school for a children's outing and 10s to the proprietor of the fish and chip shop. But it was not a way of creating an atmosphere of popularity for himself which would have an effect on voters & he was acquitted

1953 06 16

Polish 'squatters' living in a hutment at Mepal will soon want new homes. Huts accommodating 10 families are now nearing the end of their useful life and Cambridge councillors have been asked to accept 47 of the families on their housing list because the husband is employed in the city. They will accept them 'but they will have to take their turn'

1954 04 10

Ely Rural Council proposed a sixpenny increase on pre-war and a shilling increase in post-war council houses. Tenants of old style houses would be only too pleased to pay extra when their earth closets had been replaced by modern conveniences. Some haven't even got a drain and it is a disgrace to the council. Houses being built at present were too elaborate and were being let too cheaply. At Brick Lane, Mepal, there were ten houses at 19s a week; twelve others, with lavatories up and down and hot and cold water, were still let at the same rent. Pre-war houses were built at a cost of £300-£500 and originally let at 6s to 7s a week. Now they were up to 15s and no extra amenities had been provided. Post-war houses cost perhaps £2,000 and were being let at about £1.

1954 06 03

Eastern Electricity says that more villages in the Ely area are to be connected to the public supply in the next six months. Already Mepal, Coveney, Pondersbridge and Ramsey Heights have been connected and Prickwillow, Barway and outlying parts of Haddenham and Littleport will follow. But it can only be economically justified if farmers recognise that electricity be used to the fullest extent as an aid to production and not just for lighting, radio and television. It increases their output and hastens the day when electricity can be made available throughout the whole of the countryside.

1955 07 01

An inquiry considered whether to reinstate the old Sutton-Mepal Road which was closed during the war for the construction of the now disused airfield or to construct a new bypass road utilising the no.1 runway. This would divert traffic from the sharp corner at the Brook and be cheaper. But it would mean a slightly longer journey between the two villages and Mepal was dependent on Sutton for its doctor, nurse and butcher. If it was one or the other they wanted the direct route back. 55 07 01

1957 06 29

When returning from Ely Fair after a 'good night out', three Mepal landworkers saw Marcus Darby's tractor standing on the grass verge at Sutton with the ignition key in place. When one of them suggested "Let's have a taxi home" all three piled on to it and took it four hundred yards to the aerodrome, where they left it. The lads were of good character and had been well behaved in the village. They were fined £1 each and had their licences endorsed. 57 06 29a

1958 07 10

CND protest march to Mepal planned – 58 07 10

1958 08 22

Nearly 300 people took part in a six mile march from Ely to a rocket base at Mepal. Young or old, MP, clerk or labourer, all had one purpose - to denounce the Government's decision to establish rocket sites. Labour candidate Robert Davies said it was absurd to make a secret of where the bases are. Rocket hide-outs are open secrets. You may not be able to mention them but you can go and see where they are. But MP Major Harry Legge-Bourke said it was running very close to official secrets and nobody knows what Mepal might be used for 58 08 22b, 58 08 25 & a

1958 10 03

There were cries of 'shame' when Peter Cadogan of Cambridge told the Labour Party Conference that since a march from Ely to the rocket base near Mepal, Americans alarmed by the demonstration had 'given certain English employees to understand that if they want to hold their jobs they cannot be members of the Labour Party'. It was apparent that the marchers had the company of the American F.B.I.: English people demonstrating on English soil were under the hostile surveillance of the secret service of a foreign power. One man, the organiser of the march, had already resigned. 58 10 03

1959 04 16

Looking like a gigantic cigar, a tarpaulin-covered 'Thor' rocket – minus its warhead of course – passed through Ely en route to the Mepal rocket base. The 90-foot transporter with pilot drivers at the rear to ensure negotiation of the highway, was escorted by the R.A.F. police. Preceding it, to clear the streets of all other traffic, were civil police. The 'Thor', produced in America, has a range of at least 1,500 miles 59 04 16a

1959 06 05

Currently undergoing training at the Thor Intermediate Range Guided Missile School operated by the USAF in Tucson, Arizona, is Chief Technician Robert Fennell, whose wife lives in Tenison Avenue. He is one of a number of RAF personnel being trained in all phases of maintenance of the 1,500-mile range missiles to be based at Thor launching sites such as the one at Mepal. 59 06 05

1960 03 11

MP Major Legge-Bourke spoke of the rocket base at Mepal. It had a higher proportion of NCOs as against other ranks. There were plenty of first class warrant officers but practically no ordinary aircraft men. There was only one on the base when he visited. He felt very sorry for the fellow surrounded by so many stripes. The Under-Secretary of State agreed: he had never seen so many sergeants in one place in his whole life. If all bases were as cold and constituencies as cold as the Isle of Ely then he was sorry for the young chaps who have to stay there day and night looking after the installations. But morale was extremely high. 60 03 11a

1960 12 09

Five incendiary and three practice bombs were recently unearthed during digging operations at Mepal airfield, a few hundred yards from the main entrance to one of East Anglia's Thor rocket bases. It brings the total find during the three weeks in which an RAF Feltwell bomb disposal squad has been at work up to 18 bombs or Mills markers. In addition about 200 other miscellaneous items of an explosive nature have been discovered, mostly bullets. The rocket base was not in danger at any time: the biggest threat would have been death to any person in the immediate vicinity should the bombs have exploded 60 12 09b

1962 04 21

CND column of vehicles tour bases to Mepal etc – 62 04 21

1963 01 10

Mepal Airfield is gradually being landscaped. More than 400 trees have been planted with others along the main road, which was reinstated in 1958. It was one of the important air bases during the war and afterwards some outlying camps were used by squatters. Today most of the airfield is unused apart from a small section which houses Thor missiles. Now these missile bases are being gradually closed down 63 01 10a

1963 09 20

The 5,000 m.p.h. rocket missiles which once stood on remote sites such as Mepal airfield are being returned to the United States. Some have already gone back stripped of their war-heads and fuel propellants, chained inside the cavernous interiors of the giant C-133 transport aircraft. The rockets are to be used for space research and training programmes. They caused a political uproar when they arrived in this country ready for erection on their launching sites. 63 09 20c

1963 10 12

Residents in Brick Lane, Mepal petitioned Ely Rural Council over the state of their houses: they lacked in the kitchen and wash-basins in the bathroom and were subject to dampness. 63 10 12c

1963 11 25

Technical equipment from Britain's obsolete rocket bases is on view at some of the ex-Thor missile sites. One of the largest was at Mepal airfield which was closed down as an operational station during the summer and is now manned by maintenance staff. The stores and plant will be sold by auction but items such as the count-down and launch control caravans have been 'demilitarised' to ensure they cannot be used by an enemy. Practically all that is missing are the giant Thor rockets themselves which have gone back to America for space research 63 11 25, pic 63 11 27a

1963 11 27

Mepal missile base to be sold – pic – 63 11 27a

1963 12 07

Paradise Farm, Mepal, has been presented to the Ministry of Agriculture by Ald Arthur Rickwood, the Chatteris farmer. It is due to have new buildings including laboratories used for research work. The fens have been rich farming land for 200 years but many farmers are concerned at the shrinkage of peat. The wastage in some areas amounts to an inch a year, a colossal amount over a long period. Farming techniques are changing all the time and it was important to solve the problems. 63 12 07

1963 12 12

A police demonstration on the Mepal-Chatteris road showed the unerring accuracy of the radar speed meter, a piece of equipment costing £600 (about £10,600 today). It directs a beam at an angle across the road which records vehicle speeds on the meter. It is as accurate as any other scientific instrument. Some drivers say the use of radar is unsporting but police have to clear up the messy and tragic results of thousands of accidents each year 63 12 12c

1963 12 30

St Ives Sand and Gravel Company started in 1937 and is now one of the leading producers of aggregates in the country. It works at about 18 pits including Earith, Fen Drayton, Wimblington, Chippenham and Mepal, in the river terrace gravels of the Ouse Valley. One pit at Meadow Lane St Ives was a football field two years ago and has now been dug out to a depth of about 20 feet and left flooded. Filling in is a problem for this must be done with clean material which must not pollute the

water supply. On the other side of the road enormous shovels have created cliff-like sides streaked in brilliant orange and chrome. 63 12 20a

1964 09 25

Cambridgeshire's 19 wartime airfields are falling into disuse or being reclaimed as farm land. Weed-choked runways, derelict barracks and tumbledown conning towers are all that is left. At Duxford the concrete baffles have been demolished and its runways are disappearing with the rubble being used for housing and road building. Waterbeach had a succession of Vikings and Vampires aircraft but now it is mainly trainers that take off. At Bottisham many of the buildings are used for storing grain. But Mepal, which recently had a Thor missile base, is now in the hands of the Americans – 64 09 25c

1964 10 01

The new Arthur Rickwood Experimental Husbandry Farm at Mepal will soon start trials to find out how peat soils can be conserved and wastage stopped. This was requested by Ald Rickwood when he gave the farm to the nation. The effects of herbicide will be studied together with irrigation techniques. The variety of sub-soils means that the farm is ideal for such experimental work. 64 10 01

1965 11 30

Arthur Rickwood, farmer, dies at conference; in 1963 gave Experimental Husbandry Farm at Mepal – 65 11 30a

1973 01 19

Cambridgeshire will soon boast a 60-acre country-park at Milton Pits and picnic sites at Mepal Pits and Shepreth if a Committee proposal is backed by the County Council. The Countryside Commission are poised to give grants to cover 75 per cent of the purchase and development costs for all three sites. The picnic site at Shepreth would cover about 24 acres of smallholdings land on the western side of the road from Shepreth to Barrington. One side has a frontage to the River Rhee. The Cambridgeshire & Isle of Ely Naturalists Trust say they are prepared to lay out a nature trail for visitors

1973 05 17

The fens were yesterday swept by the most severe blow this spring, as high winds picked up the lighter peats in the Soham, Stretham and Mepal district, uprooting new sown crops of beet and carrots, which are particularly vulnerable. The blow appeared to be widespread and raged for several hours. There have been two blows so far this spring but neither has caused widespread damage. Last year, more than 10,000 acres of sugar beet had to be replanted after a blow at roughly the same time. A Soham farmer, Mr Guy Shropshire has been using a prototype machine which "plants" straw between vegetable rows to prevent wind damage on his 1,000-acre farm # c.22

1974 02 14

A former Mepal pub is the new home of Clement Freud, Liberal candidate for the Isle of Ely, and his wife Jill who moved in yesterday in the middle of their election campaign. Mrs Freud, who spent the morning arranging furniture before going out to canvass for her husband, was not at all worried by the rush of moving house during the campaign. The family will stay in their new home whichever way voters turn on February 28th. "We will be very happy to live here anyway, it is a very simple place, but it very nice", she said

1979 01 31p

The National Skating Association commemorated a hundred years of organised speed skating with a professional match at Bury Fen, Earith watched by 300 people. It was a Cambridge journalist, James Drake Digby, who set up the Association after he had covered the skating at Mepal during the great frost of 1878. He was so impressed by the achievements of the champion of the day, 'Fish' Smart of Welney that he determined to get rid of the cheating caused by heavy betting. He arranged a meeting in Cambridge Guildhall which led to the formation of the NSA with the Mayor as chairman and himself as secretary

1981 01 06a

Primary schools at Pymoor and Witcham may close next July; the Pymoor children will go to Lt Downham and the 35 pupils from Witcham will attend Mepal School. But Fen Drayton School may be given a temporary reprieve while councillors consider educational provision in the Fenstanton and Hilton area.

1982 08 31

Mepal welcome a group of 200 airmen who flew bombers for the 75th (New Zealand) Squadron when they packed into the village for three days of reminiscence. A reunion dance was held in a marquee on the playing field where the New Zealand High Commissioner gave a fluent address in Maori. Clement Freud, MP, had a stuffed kiwi above the front door of his house, the RAF Memorial Flight flew in and there was a display of parachuting. 82 08 31b

1983 04 16

A row over plans for a bypass at Mepal has led to six of the seven parish councillors refusing to stand for re-election. They are annoyed that the County Council has decided to press ahead with a western bypass against the wishes of villagers who claim Mepal will be turned into a cul-de-sac. An eastern route would be cheaper and help to promote industry on the nearby airfield. 83 04 16 p6

1983 04 20

Mepal Outdoor Centre which was bought by the county 12 years ago and has been used by schools, youth and community organisations to teach the basics of sailing and canoeing, has reopened under new management. It has been saved from the axe by a consortium of district councils who have installed a new management team. But it will not survive unless it gets support. It is hoped to increase the range of activities and run residential courses 83 04 20 p13

1983 05 25

East Cambs planning chief slammed the 'hysterical local opposition' each time they put forward plans for a permanent gypsy site. Already Wilburton, Mepal and Little Thetford are no go areas because of the local opposition. It means the job of solving the problem becomes progressively more difficult. The only alternative was to abandon the whole thing. Councillors agreed no action would be taken to prosecute longstanding residents on unauthorised sites until more suitable alternative plots were available 83 05 25 p7

1985 03 22

Mepal outdoor centre 85 03 22c

1987 12 15

The Isle of Ely Full Bore Gun Club, which meets at Mepal, says that proposed new firearm legislation in the wake of the Hungerford massacre would not deter a madman like Michael Ryan who used an AK47 Kalashnikov rifle to kill 16 people. The proposals affect firearms including self-loading and pump-action rifles and shotguns as well as burst-fire guns. At the Isle club more than one in five members could be forced to hand over around £13,000 worth of guns used for years without incident. They have protested to John Major MP 87 12 15

1988 03 15

A double-decker was completely destroyed in a blaze at Mepal. The fire started from beneath the bus after the driver pulled his vehicle to the side of the road with worries about an engine problem. Only one passenger was on board at the time. Nobody was injured but a nearby house in School Lane sustained heat damage to two windows. Firemen from Sutton and Ely attended. 88 03 15